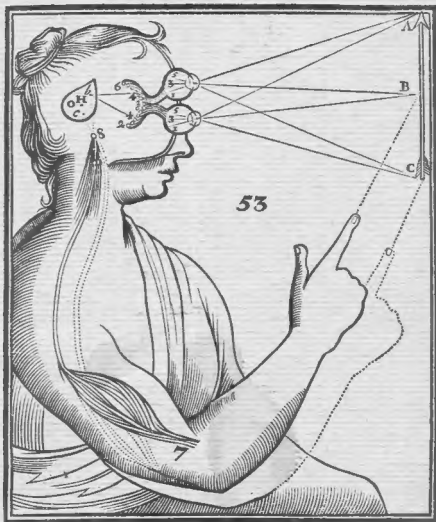


WORKING PAPERS

The Rockefeller Foundation

Independent Television-Makers and Public Communications Policy



Independent Television-Makers and Public Communications Policy:

A Seminar Conference to Promote Telecommunications

Diversity for the 1980s

The Rockefeller Foundation

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CONTENTS

Foreword	v
Preface	vii
Participants	xi

PART I. INDEPENDENTS, ORGANIZATION, AND THE SYSTEM

1. The Television Establishment, the Independent Producer, and the Search for Diversity--James Day	3
2. How to Keep Experimental Video on PBS National Programming--Nam June Paik	15
3. Dreaming While Making Ends Meet--Charles R. Allen	27
4. Independents, Media Arts Centers, and Public Television--John Reilly	35
5. The Case for a Center for Independent Television--Nick DeMartino	51
6. Independent Mandate--Alan Jacobs	64
7. Black Film-Makers, Black Audiences, and Public Television Programming--Warrington Hudlin and George P. Cunningham	73
8. The Case for Hispanic Recognition: the Case Against a Single Center for Independent Television-Makers--Jose Luis Ruiz	90

PART II. LEGISLATION

9. Pending Legislation and Other Proposals Dealing with Independent Television-Makers--Henry Goldberg	99
10. Mind Power: Collective Action for Media Reform--DeeDee Halleck	109
11. Presentation by Henry Geller	119

PART III. TECHNOLOGY

12. The Emerging Technologies and the Nation's Demographics--Herbert S. Dordick	127
---	-----

PART IV. REPORTS FROM THE REGIONS

13. Hearing from the Grass Roots	141
----------------------------------	-----

PART V. KEY THEMES AND ISSUES OF THE CONFERENCE

14. Six Conference Panels	155
---------------------------	-----

15. The Television Panel	162
--------------------------	-----

16. The Council	170
-----------------	-----

ADDENDUM

I. Hispanics and Public Broadcasting--Jesus Salvador Trevino and Jose Luis Ruiz	173
--	-----

II. Ruminations After Leaving the Rockefeller Conference-- Thomas Lennon	183
---	-----

Abbreviations	185
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FOREWORD

This book presents the papers, central issues, and many of the comments made at a three-day conference, and does so in a cogent, readable way thanks to the writers of the papers, the stenographic record made by Stanley Rudbarg, and the adroit editing of the resulting mass of words by Margaret Madigan. However, the printed account cannot convey the sense of an event: I must leave it to the perceptive reader to intuit the temperature of some of the discussions. Certainly much heat was generated over many issues, particularly those dealing with minorities. The Hispanic position detailed in this report developed out of the conference, not having been anticipated by its organizers. We are grateful to Messrs. Trevino and Ruiz for their participation and their subsequent paper, found in the addendum.

Our discussions never boiled over, and a continuity of thought emerged from participants with widely varying backgrounds that led to the creation, at the end of the conference, of a quasi-representative body to continue the discussions with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. This was unexpected. At this writing, several months after the event, I can report that the elected group has had a series of meetings and that delegates have been in touch with the CPB which has afforded them an interested hearing.

We are at a time in communications history when information control is passing from the few to the many. Film and video producers have grown in numbers since the development in the 1960s of lightweight and inexpensive video recorders and cameras. These are the "independents," around whose problems the conference centered. If they appear to want much, it is because they feel they have much to offer. The microcosmic representation at the conference voiced the concerns of thousands of independent film and video producers around the country. People, who, because they are independent, that is, unaffiliated with larger organizations, have no collective voice.

I would like to repeat my thanks to John Reilly and Herbert Dordick for their key roles in organizing the conference, to the distinguished men and women who presented papers (Shigeko Kubota's reading of Nam June Paik's paper approximated art), and to Nam June Paik, that remarkable visionary at whose insistence I decided to commit the Foundation's resources to holding the conference. And lastly, I wish to thank those many independent producers present or absent whose work in television has already done much to broaden the margins of what we think of as television.

October, 1979
The Rockefeller Foundation

Howard Klein
Director, Arts

PREFACE

Independent Television-Makers and Public Communications Policy, a seminar conference to promote telecommunications diversity for the 1980s, was sponsored by The Rockefeller Foundation on June 6, 7, and 8, 1979, and was held at 1133 Avenue of the Americas. Howard Klein, director for Arts of The Rockefeller Foundation, Herbert Dordick from the Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and John Reilly, executive director, Global Village Video Resource Center, Inc., were the conference organizers.

The purpose of the conference was to provide an arena for independent video- and film-makers to discuss the problems they faced funding, producing, distributing, and airing programs for public television.

During the three-day conference many issues were discussed, with funding emerging as a major area of contention. As one of the conference group pointed out, film- and video-makers are not like authors, who can present a finished product to a publishing house for an editor to consider--making programs is a very costly affair and money is needed up front.

A main topic among the group was how to approach the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to get the funds CPB has been directed to set aside for independent television-makers' programs. Carnegie II recommended funds be specifically delegated for independents' work, and the 1978 Telecommunications Act made it into law that monies be provided for subsidizing independents' projects.

However, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting is at present undergoing reorganization by its new president, Robben Fleming. This raises questions among the independents about the emerging face of this new regime at CPB. Will Dr. Fleming and his staff be understanding of the needs and the rights of the independents? Many asked if someone as unfamiliar as Dr. Fleming is with public television could successfully head such a critical body. The conference group discussed details of the laws dealing with new provisions for funding. How specific was the

ruling that monies would go to the independent television-makers? Very specific they were assured. How would individual independents apply and hope to receive a cut of the pie, they asked each other.

As the discussions proceeded the conference group realized the term "independent" sheltered a variety of groups, each with their own priorities: blacks, Chicanos, artists, documentarians, Native Americans, political activists, regionalists, women, and many others. And of course each person felt strongly about his or her own concerns and about being an independent television-maker. They agreed, however, that they had a common bond in being independents; and in that sense too they saw themselves as a minority. If they could pool their individual strengths in the commonality of being independent producers, they could perhaps become a reckoning force in dealing with the public television system.

There was general agreement in the conference group that alliances make for power, and power of some sort was necessary to extract funding, access, and support from the public television system. Emerging from this line of thinking was the specter of an umbrella organization, which would act in behalf of the independent film- and video-maker in dealing with the system. The independents found themselves wary of structures and reluctant to build a body of their own to deal with the bureaucracy of the system. But they realized as well the fruitlessness of meeting an institutionalized body as individuals. Power was the play, and by the third day of the conference the independents had decided to vote for a representative body. The vote was taken and an ad hoc council was elected to set into motion the construction of the foundations of a center for independents. There remained doubts in the minds of many in the group, and some were adamantly against the center. But a majority realized an organization, if created to be self-limiting and flexible, would be a step forward for the independent film- and video-makers.

Among the other prominent issues discussed at the conference were: present and pending legislation, technology and its benefits for the independents, minority rights and needs, and the creation of an Off-Off

TV situation, which would provide the television-makers with a showcase patterned on Off-Off Broadway.

In this working paper, presentations by the speakers who addressed the conference group are followed by pertinent discussions of the topics and related issues.

Margaret Madigan

2. HOW TO KEEP EXPERIMENTAL VIDEO ON PBS NATIONAL PROGRAMMING

Nam June Paik

The new Carnegie Commission report, A Public Trust, rightfully argues that public television needs more innovation, research, and development. I have worked since 1968 in this sphere of television, at WGBH in Boston and at WNET in New York in the days of the Ford Foundation's Public Broadcasting Laboratory, and I would like to suggest a few concrete plans from my own experience.

Everyone knows we need more innovation. But we also know innovative programs are not always popular during the lifetime of the artist. How, then, do we justify in a broadcast schedule the rather exotic programs of artists on tax-supported television channels?

If PBS gives to the public only what the public wants, PBS will become the same as commercial TV and will kill itself. However, if PBS gives to the public only what the public SHOULD have, then PBS kills itself, because the public will not follow it.

How do we solve this dilemma?

An ancient Chinese said, "It is not hard to become a sage; it is harder to find one." Even then there seemed to be problems in the selection and editing process. Therefore, let's look at some other more successful information-processing sectors, that is, the worlds of publishing and photo-journalism.

Doubleday's editors, for example, are surrounded by thousands of manuscripts already completed by writers from U.S. Presidents to college sophomores. An expensive manuscript is not necessarily better than a free poem by an avant-garde poet, who just wants his works to be published. Both can be offered to the public by the publisher and there will not be a de facto censorship. Editors at Popular Photography,

also, have the luxury of selecting a few good pictures from 10,000 completed photos--already finished products. In this way, competition and diversity of product are guaranteed. (Of course, there is also more than one outlet.)

In television, however, this selection process is completely reversed. The program director selects programs not from finished products but from mere ideas or scripts. Creators for television therefore need prior funding to make a pilot or product out of an approved script. This, to my mind, evil necessity of prior funding automatically eliminates about 95 percent of work by new talents, because no one is allowed in the television system to risk a production budget on an unknown name.

Again, in the literary world, great individual talents such as James Joyce, Henry Miller, and Jean-Paul Sartre received no advances for their first writings. And many great poems were first published on mimeograph machines. How, in today's television selection process, can a true but undiscovered genius ever successfully go through the funding process?

AMERICAN TELEVISION WILL NOT IMPROVE TOO MUCH UNTIL THIS PRIOR FUNDING SYSTEM CEASES TO EXIST AND PROGRAM DIRECTORS ARE ABLE TO CHOOSE THE BEST PRODUCT FROM FINISHED WORKS BY MANY FREE CREATORS AS IN THE FIELDS OF LITERATURE AND PHOTOGRAPHY!

The British Broadcasting Corporation should not and cannot be the model for PBS because BBC is running with an antiquated philosophy that there is only one typewriter in the whole of England, and BBC's job is how to perfect it. They may have an otherwise liberal philosophy, but their existential format is dictatorial in the true etymological sense. American television must have a philosophy that says, "Everybody must have his or her own typewriter for their expression and participation." In the long run, this is the only thinkable way to achieve a truly public television. Public TV must become a switchboard for multiple voices using broadcasting and other new outlets.

This utopian prophecy is already quite a concrete prospect. Three million VTRs are in use in the world now; in 1983 we will have 32 million VTRs. There will be 15 million in the U.S., 10 million in Europe, and 7 million in Japan.

Through the introduction of CCD and "chip" technology, we can soon punch out, like doughnuts, color cameras without the vidicon tube.

By 1995, the American people will be able to express themselves as easily and as cheaply on videotapes as they now do with poems, photos, dances, and songs. At that time, public TV will stand on a new ground, and we may then require Carnegie III!

Needless to say, artists have led this Copernican revolution from one-way television to two-way television. I cannot emphasize enough the political meaning of Bill Wegman's first tapes with his dog, Man Ray. Using the most primitive SONY CV equipment and without any prior funding, he managed to create a piece that has won the approval of a wide range of people from museum curators to producers of the "Tonight" and "Today" shows, and their audiences. Only PBS engineers had the effrontery and nerve to refuse to broadcast it, even after it had been aired twice by the NBC network, and locally, at WNET and WGBH many times. (After many hassles, PBS reluctantly broadcast Wegman's tapes with flag warnings that it violated the FCC's standards of vertical blanking, for which, stations were told, they could be fined up to \$25,000. Consequently, very few PBS stations carried the broadcast.

Our bookshelves contain a much wider variety of subjects and far deeper stimulation of our intellects than television fare because most books are initiated by writers without prior funding. Most TV is initiated by producers with prior funding. In 15 to 20 years, through the wider use of home VTR as a time shifting machine, a slow conversion of funding and selection methods will occur, as well as an expansion of prime time viewing from today's three hours to 24 hours a day! PBS would be able to broadcast programs with high intellectual quality but

with low public appeal at, for example, 3:00 A.M., and an interested viewer could record it for later viewing.

Now, what else should we do in the next 15 to 20 years?

I suggest, for one thing, that we broadcast two-way artist-initiated programs, not as avant-garde experimental programs, but as do-it-yourself showcases. Audience participation shows have precedents in print journalism in the "Dear Abby" columns, as letters to the editor or "amateur corners" in photo magazines and "call-in" shows on radio. In these ways, people can easily relate to programs, even if sometimes the technical quality may not be high. In this way we flip the coin: artist's experimental video will no longer be categorized as low-budget entertainment, but the most successful common people's video creations. Middle America, for which PBS programmers always express concern, will respond to such programs even more enthusiastically because advanced two-way video gadgets, including home computers, are sold more in Middle America than on the Eastern seaboard, which has a variety of other pastimes. The deepening energy crisis will force the leisure pattern of rural America more from Car and Steak to information games. Non-gravity-resisting products such as computers and video are energy efficient, therefore inflation-proof: their costs relative to high energy production items, such as cars, steel, and steaks, will decline. We can solicit viewers to send in their own video tape products through the airwaves, works lasting a few minutes perhaps, and offer prizes in home video contests. Corporations can back the expenses of such programs. This will be very different from public access cable channels. In this case, a highly talented editor would have complete freedom of selection and excerpting. An artist's far-out tapes can be mixed with other documentary shows in magazine formats. Luckily, the new tendency in the video art world is in making short tapes. Each segment can be preceded by a slide of the artist or a short introduction by the artist or amateur himself, so that viewers can relate more easily with it. We should not worry too much about technical standards.

The new time-base correctors can straighten out most time-base errors. Even if it fails, however, we can rescan the tape with a high resolution camera. Both Wegman's dog tape and John Reilly's "Irish Tapes" were rescanned with a normal studio camera, and both tapes were aired with great success. Viewers really follow information anyway, not technical quality, especially if the information is sufficiently interesting. The moon landing was the best TV with the worst picture quality!

Eventually, FBS has to accept two technical standards: one for professional entertainment and another for populist, grass-roots video. It is a natural development: the New York Times uses good paper for its Sunday Magazine section and less good paper for the news sections. Since in print journalism there are no government restrictions on paper quality, TV should also abolish the technical standard, as far as sync pulse and time-base correction. In print journalism, an attempt to ban publication simply because an essay is printed on cheap paper would be unthinkable.

But we video artists have been living under this arbitrary regulation of technical standards for fifteen years. We independent producers must test the constitutionality of FCC-NAB's technical standards--to the Supreme Court if necessary, because it amounts to a de facto infringement of the First Amendment. We ask that the ACLU or some enlightened foundations pay for the legal expenses. I say that loudly from my personal agony of having lived under the arbitrary terror of the vertical blanking regulation, which has absolutely no consequences to 99 percent of home TV sets. What has angered me even more was that this rule was regularly ignored by virtually all the commercial TV stations during their news broadcasts when they used ENG (electronic news gathering mini-cameras) and reruns of "I Love Lucy." WNET local station, seeing that NBC, CBS, and ABC news shows ignored the regulation, was quite tolerant to us. But the PBS national program engineers continually gave us problems. There is no other line of law which has so impeded the healthy development of TV as this vertical blanking

regulation. Although this problem has now been solved by the introduction of new frame buffers in time-base correctors, we must keep vigilant so that no new artificial barriers will be set up to keep the monopoly of the air waves. The only piece of technical regulation we need is one in which the sync pulse would be solid enough to make a solid picture frame in the majority of TV sets ten years old or older. I don't imagine that any other technical standard set up by a trade organization such as NAB would stand up in court if challenged on First Amendment grounds.

I assume that not all artists would like the idea of being broadcast in the same series with amateur video-makers from the hinterlands. Art works often need a dignifying frame, especially if one works with minimalist (aesthetic) vocabularies. However, "emergency Exits" were necessitated by our continuing frustration in trying to air video art nationally. Although we have made significant inroads into the schedules of WNET and WGBH, especially in the after-11:00-P.M. time periods (WNET's TV-Lab has broadcast easily 100 separate shows if one counts my own 30 five-minute pieces at the end of the broadcast schedule, which received respectable ratings and encouraging reviews), we have failed to get regularly on national air time, or when we did, it was often not carried by local stations.

As far as funding is concerned, the matter is even worse. In the first three years of The Rockefeller Foundation's funding, WGBH matched the \$100,000 a year on a one-to-one basis from 1967 to 1969. Since then, federal funding to CPB increased from a mere \$5 million in 1969 to \$120 million in 1979--an increase of 24 times! But, disastrously, the contribution from stations, local and national, dwindled to practically zero.

The Carnegie Commission report envisions \$190 million annually for the Program Services Endowment, whose only function would be to create TV programs, especially "creative programs." I quote:

While stations will use their considerable resources to provide mainstream programs and services nationwide, the Endowment will concentrate on the unconventional, creative, untested ideas in

programming and telecommunication services on which the stations, acting alone or in combination, would be unlikely to risk their funds. [emphasis added]

Specifically, Carnegie II recommends that \$10 million be spent for research and development alone. From our past track record we are amply justified in getting a small pie from this new funding source. Carnegie II even specifies that "the Endowment might finance a Center for Independent Television, whose job would be to develop broadcast formats that can take advantage of the range of talent among independent TV producers."²

As a small part of this envisioned Center for Independent Television, I would like to suggest the following five mechanisms:

Fellowship Program

The selection process must satisfy the following conditions:

1. It must be cheap and speedy, so that precious money will not be evaporated in the pipeline.
2. It must insulate against any one director's taste.
3. Funds must go directly to individuals and not to stations or staff producers.

So far, three funding sources, The Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York State Council on the Arts, have had a fine tradition of promoting independent video-makers and video artists. They all have fine panel systems, which so far have worked quite well. If the three organizations recommend 15 projects altogether, and fund them at \$10,000 each, it will give the incentive for the Endowment of Carnegie II to match with \$20,000 or \$30,000 each. It will make each project budget for \$30,000 or \$40,000. Creators are not required to make a full 30-minute program, since funds at \$40,000 may be insufficient, especially if one employs professional performers.

Roving Editors

One current problem in video art is that people have too many hours of unedited tapes. "Media Bus" alone has more than 500 hours of unedited tape shot since 1969. Some of these tapes increase in value with the passing of time, since videotape has the unique quality of freezing

time, which makes historical feedback even more interesting than immediate playback. Our bottleneck is in editing. It is not only that artists lack machines to edit on, but also, artists have not acquired the skills and mental training to view and make critically hard choices from their own materials. If a new Center for Independent Television were to hire a few highly talented editors who can edit a broadcastable show from such chaotic materials, it could greatly benefit the PBS system. Of course, many artists would resist having their materials shortened by a third person, but we will find enough artists who will live with excerpting, especially if the artists get rich compensation, such as \$1,000 per minute, or so.

These editors must be appointed by the program directors of the TV station, or be acceptable to them, so that the program director has the fullest confidence in their judgment. Program directors of large TV stations are so busy they have to rely on verbal communication from trusted lieutenants or well-trusted producers. Since videotape-watching is time consuming, and since we cannot ask the program directors to extend their day from 24 to 28 hours, we must therefore set up a mechanism convenient both to independents and programmers. My idea is to let the program director pick his man, but we artists must pay that man's salary, so that we can have veto power! Since this man (or woman) will know where his salary is coming from, he must therefore fight for more air time for the artist and independent.

Community Editing Centers

The most heartening development these days is the increasing number of regional editing centers set up or assisted by The Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York State Council on the Arts. Editing is the central nervous system and the camera is peripheral as the eyes. Too much attention is spent on camera quality and not enough on editing gear. Producers and even funding agencies tend to favor expenditure on programs with immediate high visibility and not on editing machines with slower returns. Editing machines should and can become as cheap as a darkroom. If one avoids

joy-stick systems (fancy but fragile), an \$8,000 system can produce 10,000 hours or 20 hours a day for two years, if the equipment is properly maintained. That will make the per-hour cost one dollar. The major cost for an editing center is personnel and space costs--administration, engineers, and room rent. This can be reduced if one or two persons supervise four or five machines. Earphone operation can make the sharing of the same room by many people possible. All major cities should and must have such communal editing centers with at least five editing machines. The research and development budget of the Endowment must amplify the trend already begun.

A Cost Efficiency Test

Financial self-reliance is a pre-condition for freedom--and two-way video. The artist has again led in this struggle. In a "typical" educational TV show of the past, hardware studio costs took so much money that producers had no way of hiring good talent for appearances or research. (There were exceptions.) The result was talking head after talking head. The producer-artist must have ample elbow room in choosing the ratio of hardware to software in the budget. For example, one can choose the 3/4-inch format for mastering, and the resulting saving of thousands of dollars can buy a round trip to Moscow. In my tape, "New York-Moscow Media Shuttle" (done in collaboration with Dmitri Devyatkin) I mixed some parts mastered on 3/4-inch tape with parts mastered on 2-inch tape. It was aired nationally once and three times over WNET. Nobody, not even God (much less PBS engineers), could distinguish the parts mastered on 3/4-inch tape from those mastered on 2-inch tape.

New hardware development makes this hide-and-seek game obsolete. A new 1-inch recorder (the NAB approved it for broadcasting) is supposedly better than the 2-inch recorder. I strongly urge that the WNET TV-Lab upgrade its current 3/4-inch playback master to 3/4-inch playback system in favor of a 1-inch master system, which will make artists' tapes achieve full broadcast standard. The price reduction from \$2,500 a day for 2-inch to about \$500 a day for the 1-inch system will pay the

new equipment off (about \$70,000) in 35 days, or roughly in 10 TV shows.

Indexing

The power of the New York Times is found not only in its circulation and quotability, but also in the fact that it is the only newspaper thoroughly indexed. The fleeting vision of one show is bound to be wiped out by the next like a morning dew under the rising sunshine. If it wants to be the New York Times of broadcasting, PBS must develop for critical re-evaluation a healthy hardcopy indexing reference system through the video disk. PBS can thus produce shows to be aired in the future on subjects who may not be celebrated enough when the shows are made.

I want to emphasize for the record two very important quotes from Carnegie II:

The Endowment must have the flexibility to support experiments and high risk projects utilizing non-broadcasting as well as broadcasting systems.³

Endowment will have a programming mission extending beyond the development of broadcast radio and television shows. It might sponsor a variety of experiments on developing technologies potentially applicable to public telecommunications.⁴

Video artists have been the pioneers. We are the first social group who made an international video network through museums, colleges, community centers, and libraries for alternative distribution and critical re-evaluation. The three funding sources--The Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York State Council on the Arts--should continue in their support of nonbroadcasting arts and they should be joined by others. And the Carnegie II-proposed Endowment must include these nonbroadcasting artists under their research and development budgets and programming ventures.

Ezra Pound's fame is not based on his broadcasting from Italy.

NOTES

1. Carnegie Commission on the Future of Broadcasting. A Public Trust, New York: Bantam Books, 1979, pp. 132 and 246.
2. Ibid., p. 168.
3. Ibid., p. 162.
4. Ibid., p. 170.